

# **A LITTLE MORE OXYGEN**



**a Charlie Marino  
short story**

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Cover image eyes: courtesy Pamela Tiffin in 1974, Columbia University

## A Little More Oxygen

Neanderthals wandered the African savannah and had already migrated into Europe and Asia. Hearty, strong, short of stature, and thick-haired, even the women. They had fire. They had art. They were among the first fully thinking humans, but their minds were stable and small generating no emotional dreams when sorting memories of the day into short and long-term storage. Stable enough to be without gods or superstitions. Living in small groups of 30 to 300 individuals - hunting and gathering but had no agriculture. Clothing and tools but no metals.

Plasmoids were also wanderers. They evolved during millennia past when the oxygen content of their native Earth was far higher the plasmoids came into being. As insect life peaked with ten-foot-long centipedes and frighteningly powerful beetles large enough to hunt down the tiny mammals of the time. They were the sole descendants of gaseous creatures once floating through the atmosphere. Living on sunlight and airborne organic compounds, they evolved into slightly heavier varieties in those ancient days of high O<sub>2</sub> levels, until at last consciousness was reached.

Being basically gaseous and electrical in nature, their consciousness was an integral part of their life forms, of their entire being. For better or worse, the plasmoids reached a point where they became so dense they were almost bound to the surface of the Earth, and could no longer float into the upper atmospheric reaches.

Life continued. Carbon dioxide and nitrogen levels rose as oxygen fell. So slow did the gradual erosion of O<sub>2</sub> occur that it wasn't noticeable to generations of land animals. None but the plasmoids remembered and observed the demise of the giant insects when their metabolism could no longer support massive exoskeletons. Those giant bugs evolved into smaller and smaller forms, as they vastly increased in number across the planet. Every ecological niche harbored some insects which managed to not only adapt but flourish.

Not so fortunate were the plasmoids. For all their intelligence, they lacked technology. They lacked the means to alter their environment or themselves. Like many ocean sharks, they were as fully evolved as natural processes could achieve. The primitive sapiens, now evolved into a Neanderthal form, could heat the cool nights with fire, provide additional light against nighttime predators, and even learn to tenderize and preserve the meats they ate using fire. They were clever and resourceful among all animals. But the plasmoids did not need these things. They needed the higher oxygen content of the ancient atmosphere. Even though living for nearly half a millennia and retaining knowledge of those earlier times, they could only pass that knowledge to new generations of plasmoids who watched helplessly as insects shrunk in size and their numbers dwindled. Reproduction was increasingly difficult and celebrated in its rareness.

It was during this period, watching their own inevitably approaching end, that observations of the other life forms around them began to focus on the curiously semi-intelligent Neanderthals. Many plasmoids began living among them, and though gaseous were easily visible to the primitive sapiens. Unafraid of the floating gas bags of colorful

swirling form, Neanderthal children would run around them laughing and taunting with good nature. Parents looked on unconcerned, knowing from experience the plasmoids were harmless - unlike so many other creatures of this world, large and small alike. It was inevitable that the discovery would be made. A change that would alter both species forever.

Frequently a small child running about with the others would dash straight through a plasmoid. It did no real harm, but adults noticed how if they lingered, both the plasmoid and the child would be momentarily disoriented, dizzy, almost like being drunk on fermented berries. The other children would laugh and point, the adults shook their heads, and the plasmoids studied. They studied the young minds of these very physical creatures. They touched and probed and became fascinated with their version of consciousness, limited though it was.

Thus it was that the idea formed. They'd always had time to consider and study their world, in lifetimes far exceeding solid carbon life forms who at their best extended to a century or two, usually far far shorter. Now their own time as a species was limited.

It was noted that not only contact was possible, but desirable, physically. The mammals used oxygen much like the plasmoids themselves. Happily, those who 'communed' with a human in this manner came away not disoriented but suddenly more vibrant and clear thinking, unlike their mammal companion. They experienced osmotic absorption and actually breathed through their mammal. In return, when a larger Neanderthal inevitably tried the same trick out of curiosity, the plasmoids were ready. They'd identified the pleasure centers of the bicameral brain and gently stimulated it. The effect was electrifying. Adults could sustain the contact for much longer than children and wanted to. Repeatedly. In fact, it was usually the plasmoid who broke contact when they detected the human was in danger of damaging itself.

Tribes of Neanderthals with their plasmoid companions continued to cohabit on African plains. Other tribes, lacking the increasingly limited numbers of their gaseous neighbors, stayed away from them in fear, not knowing what to make of the floating but obviously directed creatures. A communing tribe would be amused by plasmoids appearing to charge at outside humans straying too close to their camp. Intentionally or not, they drove them off.

Plas-Neand tribes traveled where they would almost unmolested, even to the best water holes and on known animal trails for hunting and ambush. Their gaseous companions learned to force communion with lesser creatures valued by the humans, halting meat creatures and invoking panic in large predators. Occasionally Plas-Neand tribes would cross paths in peace and exchange communions as purely human tribes sometimes exchanged meat or skins or females. And their plasmoids outlived their solitary cousins who had not learned or embraced this communing trick. Soon they were the only ones of their species left, the atmosphere being too low in O<sub>2</sub> to exist without this occasional symbiosis. Their numbers were now quite small but steadied.

After generations of this symbiosis, the study of their own physiology revealed that they didn't cheat death completely, but were still doomed. No new plasmoids were being birthed by the aerial mitosis natural to them and they lacked other methods. There simply wasn't enough O<sub>2</sub> in the air. Occasional communion with humans could sustain them as individuals, but not provide enough to breed. As a species, they would cease to exist at the end of their present long but mortal life spans. Having no other alternatives, the plasmoids sought a different kind of immortality. They sought it in the only solid creature exhibiting reason of sorts, and an ability to alter its environment, if only slightly thus far.

By tweaking the neural connections inside a human brain during commune, they could, to a limited degree, insert thoughts, ideas, and pictures, but had no control. Worse, they could make no physical modifications. They realized these creatures would never become what plasmoids were, as they fruitlessly sought to alter them or make symbiosis permanent.

One day, a pregnant young human female, who did not yet know of her pregnancy, communed. Most pregnant humans avoided communing until well after the birth of their young. This young woman had enjoyed the merging with the pretty gaseous forms her entire childhood and seeing a particularly pleasant looking one, hovering near the cooking fire where it was offering itself for human attention, she approached and slowly entered the plasmoid by sitting on the ground in a single smooth motion.

The fetus inside her was unknown to her or her tribe but detected, probed, and found to contain something new by the plasmoid engulfing her: previously unnoticed stem cells.

Undifferentiated, massively multiplying in the fetus, and were being assigned by the human DNA blueprint becoming specific cell types. Excitation became universal as the plasmoid related its discovery. These stem cells were the way into human DNA. These mammalian cells could be tweaked and twisted and prodded before differentiation. It meant a new version of humans could be made. A larger brain cavity and more soft brain tissue. A potential for intelligence and environmental manipulation that would dwarf its parents.

There was much debate, though the ethics of modifying mammals was never mentioned. One leader spoke up. "Such larger brains would produce a drain on the energy resources of the body as a whole. It cannot be sustained as such."

Well aware were the plasmoids of energy drain and oxygen consumption equations, and after centuries of contact were intimate with mammalian ADP energy conversion, fascinatingly different than their own. "We shall tradeoff their massive musculature to feed the larger brains", observed another plasmoid. "Yes, they'll be weaker and lighter elsewhere, but the lack of need will elongate the skeleton, making them faster in flight or chase, taller, and capable of seeing farther along a horizon with that height."

"Their bicameral brain will have its difficulties. They'll require longer sleep cycles and dream heavier as their minds adjust to the larger memory capacity. Their memory is now located in

one area, as are many functions. Our influence will cause memory pockets to form throughout the brain. They'll imagine things that do not yet exist. Their grasp on reality will at times be perilous."

"Their imagination will allow them to see things which do not yet exist, yes, but which can be achieved. Thus their tool-making will be greatly improved. They'll appreciate the plants that cover this world and one day understand the plant life cycle. Now only gathered at opportunity, their food supply will be greatly expanded in a way not now possible for mere humans."

"It is not only their parents with whom they must row and contend. Those outside such a tribe of modified humans will retain their present shorter size but superior strength and thus be a danger to them..."

"Ours will be weaker, yes, but will think in terms which ultimately guarantee victory, for they, as we do, will value and use their intelligence over their physical strength."

"Will these human parents even accept such smaller births and clearly weaker offspring? They still live in a time where clever is good, else they would not have themselves harnessed fire, but strength is presently better."

"Human mothers cling to and hover over their helpless offspring already. Maternal care will be extended until the child can stand on its own mentally as well as physically, but mothers need to know nothing new nor adopt new techniques beyond their present instinct. In their maturity, such offspring will show their value and be sought after for breeding. In time, they shall begin breeding preferentially with each other. One day they may fully supplant their human ancestors. But that is more generations in the future than we can see or shall survive to witness."

"Then we must create numbers of them as soon as possible, that our favor and our tweaking during commune shall provide them some protection and status. Pour as much of ourselves as possible into these fetuses and shepherd them after birth."

"They will carry forward not our DNA, nor can we hope to be remembered in the centuries following our absence except in vague stories and tales. Yet some semblance of our will shall continue as they spread across this world, once covered with our floating forms. These children shall cover it again. We leave no physical sign of our passing, but something better than static structures or records. Life. Consciousness. And a chance, just a chance, to control the very environment around them so that they, so like and unlike ourselves, are not at this changing planet's mercy."

"It is enough."

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